

LITERATURE FOR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN RURAL AREAS

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There are a number of conditions in rural areas which have made the task of creating literature for pre-school children very difficult. For one, there is no real pre-school institution and children's very first exposure to books takes place in class one when they join school. And the pressure of school, in which reading is not only to be learnt but courses 'finished', puts an end to the joy children might gain out of literature.

Secondly, most children in rural areas do not speak the standard language in which literature is usually created. For instance, in a village in Hindi-speaking Madhya Pradesh, children might speak *Gondi*, *Korku*, *Bundeli*, and a Marathi-influenced Hindi, all in the same classroom, but not the Hindi of the text-book!

Often, too, the literature such children get to read is very alien to their culture and life-style. Add to all this the fact that we are still in the process of introducing written literature where traditionally only oral literature was predominant.

It was in the light of all this that what could be defined as early literature was evolved by us

in *Prashika* (the *Prathamik Shiksha Karyakram*) of *Eklavya*, a voluntary organisation. This is a project to evolve child-centred, activity-based primary education for the government school system, especially as it exists in the rural areas and small-town environments.

In such a context we found that merely the introduction of literature was not enough, and that an interphase between oral and written literature was required. Hence, a great deal of literature was created which could be narrated orally and then introduced in written form as well. And, as involvement of the learners and the inclusion of the language they used was an important component of the early literature they were going to face, participation of the children was essential.

It being clear that children love to play around with sound and fantasy, many poems and stories of this kind were worked out and tested with children ranging from two to five years. Here is an example of a poem liked by the children, about a boy named *Khat-khat*:

*Ek tha Khat-khat,
Bahut hi natkhat.
Ek din jhatpat
Gaya voh panghat
Wahan par dekha
Usne jamghat;
Jamghat par ho gai
Uski khat-pat;
Logon ne bola
Chal hat, chal hat!
Par ad gaya khat-khat
Pit gaya phat-phat
Aur phir bhaaga
Khatpat jhat pat
Jhat jhat jhat jhat
Jhat pat khat pat!*

Before coming to written material, children can be told stories that move forward with their participation. For instance, a fox catches a cold and every time he begins to say something he

tor says - "And the fox said..." the whole class goes *achhoo, achhoo*. In waiting for and anticipating the right moment when they could explode into sneezes, children end up listening more attentively than they would otherwise have.

Similarly, when a vain cock falls off a tree the dog laughs *bho - ho - ho*. The goat laughs *mey - hey - hey*. Now, did the horse laugh? Later on in the story, these animals snore. So how would they have snored?

Often, too, the narrator describes an object in order to elicit the words that children use for certain things. For example, he says: "She was carrying it on her head, to fill with water, and it was yellow in colour and if you knocked it with your finger it sounded like this - *ting!*" When children have supplied the local word it is included in the story, and when they are introduced to the story in written form — either on the blackboard, or in cyclostyled form or in the workbook — it has many elements of their language, culture and environment in it.

Poems, too, can be designed in such a fashion as to move forward only when someone adds another line to it. For instance —

*Chowkay mein lag gayi aag, ho
Saaray bartan nikley bhaag.
Thaali bhaagi khun khun, khun khun
Gilaas bhaaga tun tun, tun tun*

A rough translation:

The kitchen is on fire, a-ho,

*The utensils are all on the run,
The plate she runs khun-khun-khun,
The glass he goes tun, tun, tun...*

Each participant adds a line about another utensil running away from the fire in the kitchen and the sound made by it running away. This kind of poem, named *Sab ki Kavita* (everyone's poem), could be used for learning a variety of things. Here I mention just one more, for colour —

*Kya hai kaala, kya hai safed
Moonchh hai kaali, daant safed.
Bhains hai kali, doodh safed
Kya hai kaala, kya hai safed...*

Translation:

*O what is black and what is white?
Moustaches are black and teeth are white,
A buffalo is black, its milk is white,
What is black and what is white?*

Thus, the kind of literature that we have evolved for pre-school children in rural areas attempts to include children's world-view as well as their culture, environment and language. In a sense, though, these efforts have led to more than literature for pre-school rural children. For what has emerged after six years of work is the kind of material which not only helps children acquire reading skills, but also attracts them to school.

I have been called a writer for "young people". I write for people. In this country my biographies are often sold to the youth departments of libraries. In other countries my books have been translated for adults. One of my books, Sigmund Freud, published for young people by the original publisher, was reprinted in paperback for all types of readers. In my mind, there are no old or young readers, only readers.

Rachel Baker